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The storyteller who wanted to change the world

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But tides are turning now and we are embarking on a managed retreat, as we realise we can't continue to hold the sea back. All this I see from my reedy, panoptic hide.

Standing in a field, it seems to me that my peaceful spot sits amid the country's fusebox. A buzz of consumption-in-progress, all created by the complex interweave of human practice and infrastructure, as discussed by Nicola Spurling in the second article in this collection. But on this particular spot, the third voice in this interweave is the landscape; a layering of human, animal, vegetable, mineral and element. This third voice is the one I'm enjoying the most but I can't deny what's in the background.

The birds are the first thing you notice in this flat landscape. They love it here and we're getting to know each other. I'm becoming an accidental ornithologist. I still don't know their names but I'm learning their idiosyncratic shapes, sounds and movements. The different ways they move in flight. The colours they flash. They're developing characters. Not something I had expected. And I see how they react to me specifically, as there's only us here. Mostly, they give the human shape a wide berth.

This is where Boris Johnson, the current Mayor of London, wants to put his new Thames Estuary Airport too (aka Boris Island). I think he's relying on no one knowing this place. It's not been boldly declared a National Park because it doesn't conjure the idyllic or the sublime. There are no other humans here but everyone else is here, as a result. It's bio-diverse in flora and fauna. Not quite a man-made ghetto yet. I'm told it's the UK stronghold for water voles but I've not seen any so far. They're shy but they love the ditches, drains, borrow dykes, saltings and fleets - all created by those clever engineers. This whole sub-sealevel landscape hinges on a tide-triggered sluice flap.

There's a lone building, bang in the middle of the marshes. The first few people to mention it to me simply refer to it as The Shades and mumble something about smuggling. It's a creepy building, sat there, miles from anywhere, until you find out it used to be a pub called The Shades House. I wish it was still open.

The Shades seems like an odd name until you've spent a whole hot summer's day out on these marshes, with no cover for miles around. Then it makes sense. I'm told it was frequented by those who used to work the marshes and fields. There have been two sea walls built since then, each newer one higher than the last, pushing the sea back each time and leaving the pub high and quite literally, dry. It's odd to think of enough people being out here to warrant a pub. I'm used to having the marshes to myself. This is symptomatic of a Moving Baseline Syndrome - a term commonly used to describe our ongoing cognitive normalisation of the now precipitous rate of biodiversity loss.

Standing here, I think I'm less interested in the photography and more interested in just being here. In the past I've taken on the challenge of learning photography (an industrial-era technology) in order to represent my surroundings, but taking on the challenge of just being present and listening to what I feel from an open - or as some would say, empty - landscape, is a new one for me. How do I convey this? How do I act on it? The photograph is not the landscape. The map is not the territory. My wellbeing feels tied to this place and the time I spend here. Somewhere I can connect to. Somewhere I can hide in plain view and survey what would otherwise be invisible to me, were I inside the city.

Want to see more?

Visit www.timmitchell.co.uk to see more of Tim's work.

10. The storyteller who wanted to change the world

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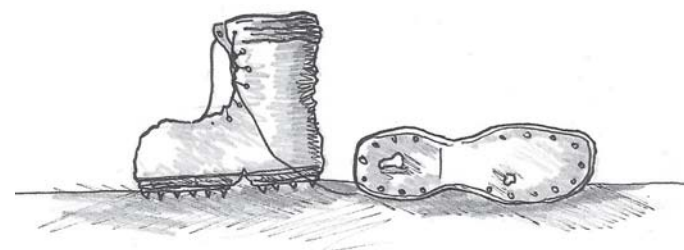
Illustrations by Rachel Thompson, www.rachelthompsondesign.co.uk



here was once a young woman who loved to tell stories. In this she was encouraged by her grandmother, who was also a storyteller, who said to the young woman: "Use your gifts - use them for good." She also said: "Find what it is that you love to do and makes your heart sing, and do that. Because what the world really needs is people whose hearts sing." And so the young woman told her stories.

She lived in a very beautiful land, and she lived very happily... until things began to go wrong. It was as if there was a blight on the whole land. First there was drought, and the crops failed. And then rain, rain, rain, never-ending rain, and everyone was flooded. And from further away came stories of people who were starving, of terrible storms wreaking havoc, of hundreds of thousands of refugees. Finally, the young woman could bear it no longer, and because she'd been inspired by a lot of stories, she decided she would go on a quest to discover the cause of the problem. To find the witch who had set a wicked spell on the world, or the heartless giant who was sucking the life-blood from the land. And, because she had been inspired by a *lot* of stories, she had a pair of iron-soled shoes made for her, in which to walk the world over.

And so she set off, and she walked the world for a year and a month and a week and a day, visiting people who had suffered from this strange weather, listening to many wise women and men, staying with people who lived in cultures very different from her own, and learning from them. Finally she came home, with holes in the bottom of her iron-soled shoes: older, and wiser, and very downcast.



And she went to see her granny.

"Granny, I think I've found the cause of all these problems we're having," she sighed.

"Why so downhearted then? Isn't that what you went to discover?"

"Yes, but Granny, it isn't a wicked witch, it isn't a heartless giant, it's all of us! It's to do with how we all live our lives, every day! See, Granny, I've discovered that everything fits into one web of life; everything is part of one great Earth system. But we've grown too big for our boots. We're taking

more than our fair share and we've put everything out of balance, and that's what's causing all these problems."

Her granny sucked her teeth.

"Well, isn't it better to know the truth?"

"Yes, but Granny, a witch would be scary, a heartless giant would be terrifying, but at least I'd know what to do about them. I don't know what to do about this! How am I to persuade everybody that we need to change how we live? It's not even as if people are necessarily doing *bad* things. They're often doing good things in bad ways. What can I do about *that*? I'm just a storyteller. What good are stories? You've got to help me, Granny – you're very wise."

Her granny thought for a moment or two, and then she said, "Well, I can't give you an answer, my dear. All I can give you is what I've learned. And if you want me to do that, you'll have to sit up with me all night long, and never stir, or speak, or slumber, or snore. Can you do that?"

"Yes, Granny, I can do that."

So her granny banked up the fire and they sat down by the hearth with big mugs of hot chocolate, and food to keep them going through the night. And all night long the grandmother took her granddaughter on an amazing adventure to the four corners of the world, and back in time too. And all this without stirring for an inch or a moment from where they sat.



"Once upon a time in a land full of humiliated people there was a leader with a toothbrush moustache and a twisted heart, who told a powerful story about the woes of that land: where they had come from, who was to blame, and what should be done about them. And his story captured the hearts of his listeners and turned them to evil, or merely to cowardice, and *six million people* were killed in concentration camps."

The young woman shuddered with horror.

And then:

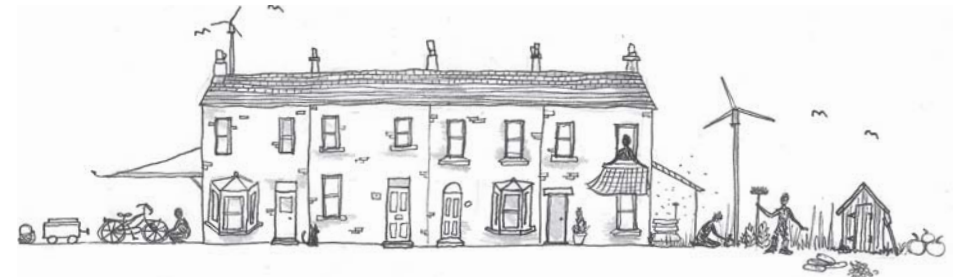
"Once upon a time in a land across the sea lived a woman just like me, who one day was simply too tired to stand at the back of a bus. And the story of her refusal to do so scurried through the streets, and gave hope to a people, and found its way to the greatest storyteller of the age, who began *his* story 'I Have a Dream'. He told a story of the oppression and the longings of millions, which set alight a great movement for justice."

The young woman thrilled with hope.

And so it went on, all night long: epic stories and small-scale stories; stories that women tell to give each other courage in childbirth; stories of ordinary people cast down into debt and despair because they listened to the tales told them by conmen, who would have them believe strange and terrible stories about what they needed to be happy. Then finally, as the first rays of the sun crept over the windowsill and the last embers of the fire fell to ash on the hearth, the old woman stopped speaking.

The young woman, who had sat all night long without stirring or speaking or slumbering or snoring, shook herself and exclaimed, "Granny, it's *all about stories* – the stories we listen to, the stories we live by, the stories we ignore! The question is not whether a storyteller *can* make a difference, but *what* difference she will make!" And she kissed her grandmother quickly and ran out into the wood.

There she stayed. Three days she stayed, sleeping and wandering and thinking, and wandering and thinking and sleeping. When she emerged she put on a good stout pair of walking boots (because she'd realised that iron-soled shoes are not at all comfortable), and she set off with a story to tell.



It was a story of how humanity faced one of the greatest challenges it had ever had to face with courage, and ingenuity. A story not of doom and gloom, but of joy and hope. She travelled telling her story, and she found others who had stories to tell too, and she listened to their stories of how they were learning to do things differently. How they were doing old things in new ways, and sometimes new things in old ways, finding a better way to live. Taking a bit less and sharing a bit more. Stories

of how they were having fun doing this, and reaping many benefits. This group of people wove a wonderful story together called The Great Turning, and they made it real in how they lived their lives.

No doubt you'll want to know whether the young woman achieved her aim of inspiring people to change with her stories. But you know, I can't tell you that. I can't tell you the ending of this story, because we are right in the middle of it, now. All I can give you is the question that I was left with when I heard this story. Will *you* join The Great Turning?

Note: I am indebted to Joanna Macy for the phrase *The Great Turning*, which she characterises as "a name for the essential adventure of our time: the shift from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization." See: <http://joannamacy.net/thegreatturning.html>

Afterword: what is a 'fairy story' doing in a book of articles about sustainability?

In December 2012 a storytelling festival was held in Aberystwyth. One of the events involved creating and telling a ten minute story in response to the question "Can storytellers save the planet?" I wasn't very keen on the form of the question, as I believe the *planet* will do fine in the long run; the issue is whether we will act to save humanity from needless suffering, and other species from extinction. Since this issue is of grave concern to me, and I believe the role of stories is crucial to how we approach it, I agreed to take part. *The storyteller who wanted to change the world* was my contribution.

Later came the option to include the tale in this book, and with it, my concern about whether a story would be taken seriously. When the possibility of illustrations was mooted, I requested that they not be coloured, so as not to make my piece seem too childish. This led to the suggestion that maybe I could change some aspects of the story if I wanted to make it less like a 'fairy tale'. Perhaps the activities of the central character, the young woman, could be made more contemporary – could she go on a gap year and then become a journalist, for example?

However, to recreate the story in such a way would be to attempt to turn it into a naturalistic, literary short story, rather than one in the oral tradition (no written version of my tale existed until I transcribed a recording I had made of it). The two different forms involve very different tools. A modern, naturalistic short story relies on the writer's talent for characterisation and dialogue, on nuance, on the authenticity of the voices created. In the oral/folk tradition, however, the power of the narrative is derived from analogy and from the use of symbols (e.g. iron-soled shoes, indicating the hard journey to be made, and their abandonment when the young woman realises the journey can be made joyfully), plus archetypal characters such as the seeker and the wisdom figure that tap into deep-rooted cultural myths and meanings. Although I make no claims for my story's merit, the oral form is one I feel more confident using than attempting a realistic, contemporary written fiction, and it is well-suited to my purpose.

What we have come to regard as 'fairy tales' were not originally exclusively children's stories; nor were they only for entertainment. Many of these stories have been lost, and others have come to us only through edited and Disneyfied versions created for children, in which the protagonist's adventures are no longer presented or understood as allegorical quests for meaning, purpose, or personal and spiritual development. However, traditional folktales endeavoured to explain life: how it came to be, and why things happen. They expressed beliefs, fears, and values, and the telling of these stories helped create and transmit community identity, culture, and wisdom. In other words, these stories were a community's attempts to understand the world around them, find their place in it, and pass on what they had learnt. A story that aims to engage with the great challenge of how to respond to climate change fits well with this tradition.

My heroine exclaims that this challenge is "*all about stories* – the stories we listen to, the stories we live by, the stories we ignore!" Our lives are directed and given meaning by stories, conscious and subconscious narratives about the world and our place in it. We behave in certain ways because they fit with the roles we take on (for example as 'professional workers' or 'responsible parents'). We buy things because we accept the script that deems these products necessary or desirable. And we respond to the way issues are framed.

So far, stories about climate change have tended towards narratives of threat and even catastrophe. They play on fear and guilt. Too often they lack any focus on realistic solutions, and frame personal action as sacrificial or outlandish¹². Or else they focus simply on facts and figures, and not the values that really motivate action (see also the eighth article in this collection, by Adam Corner). But people do not like feeling afraid, guilty, or helpless. They do not want to wear hair shirts or appear abnormal. 'Climate change' is a phrase associated with negative images and feelings, and people involved in trying to encourage lower-carbon lifestyles have begun to avoid using it, as I have found in my research (see the paper referenced at the end of this article). New stories are needed.

My tale doesn't mention any specific solutions either. Instead it offers an idea of the direction that I suggest these new stories, and new responses to climate change, need to take. Some projects have begun this work – for example, the Transition movement, with its positive, empowering language and focus on the many benefits of reduced dependency on fossil fuels. Of course, individual and community action is only one element of what we need; a new political narrative and structural change at all levels of society are essential too. But in whatever arena we are seeking to 'change the world' I believe we need to shift our focus away from the question "how can we deal with climate change?" and ask instead, "how shall we seek to create wellbeing for all in future?"

Want to read more?

Email Rachel (rachel.howell@ed.ac.uk) for a copy of her 20-page article *It's not (just) "the environment, stupid!" Values, motivations, and routes to engagement of people adopting lower-carbon lifestyles*, where she discusses her research with people who are making large lifestyle changes. It appeared in the journal *Global Environmental Change* in 2013.

12 Some of these issues are discussed in greater detail in *Warm words: How are we telling the climate story and can we tell it better?* a 30-page 2006 Institute for Public Policy Research report by Gill Ereaut and Nat Segnit, available online, and in *Carbon Reduction Activism in the UK: Lexical Creativity and Lexical Framing in the Context of Climate Change*, an article by Brigitte Nerlich and Nelya Koteyko, published by the journal *Environmental Communication* in 2009.